

Claim Jumper

by Michael O'Brien

"I was born underground, I've lived underground, and I'm gonna die underground," Pepper grumbled as she shone the light around another pitch-black corner, revealing yet another broken, monstrous form sprawled along the floor.

"You'd die a lot faster up on the surface," Flameout answered, glancing at the screen of the heavy, antique portable scanner she carried. "At least down here we've got air, and a lack of Gongen patrols — so far."

"What am I doing down here? I just wanted to finish paying off these cybereyes! I had a freakin' full house. What business did he have drawing into a straight flush?"

Naida "Flameout" Jackson set down the scanner and arched her sore back, looking her temporary partner over carefully. Pepper was a bit short, with a scrawny figure and a pouty face framed in blond hair, and wore a general air of incompetence. "Yes, I've heard this over and over for the last four days: now you owe The Gambler your backside, and you have to score on this trip or he's likely to claim it in an unpleasant fashion." She scowled at the other woman. "I'm beginning to have trouble remembering why I even brought you along."

Pepper Tokarates gave her a sly look. "Because you don't have a cred to your name either, and my cousin was willing to spot you the fuel for this little trip to Ganymede."

"Right. We both owe someone else our backsides." Flameout picked up the scanner again with renewed motivation, shoving her long brown hair away from her narrow face. "If we can just find something down here halfway valuable, both our problems will be solved." *And I won't have to listen to you whine any more*, she thought. "Let's get moving again."

They trudged down one echoing tunnel after another, the grooved laser-dug walls blurring together as their search dragged on. The air had indeed checked out as breathable, but it was chilly and stale with a metallic tang. Frost blurred a few of the flat surfaces, and both women wore dark reflective coveralls which trapped body heat, as well as thermal cloaks.

It seemed every corner concealed another half-frozen soldier: most were Gongen, but there were a few six-limbed Quay bodies scattered about. Here, an empty socket had once secured some piece of equipment; over there lurked a huge, tarp-covered block of machinery, immovable without the use of two or three forkbots. If they could find a couple of the big lifting devices and get them working again, the massive mechanisms would probably be worth some cred back on Europa; but Flameout didn't think the Gongen owners would give them enough time for that. It was too bad. Pepper might be a blithering Cartel fool, but she was a decent bot programmer.

Pepper kicked an empty packing crate stenciled *Deigan Heavy Mining, GLC* in both English and Japanese characters for the convenience of any shippers. "The Gongen sure left this place in a hurry when the Central GovCorp overran it. I wish they hadn't done such a good job cleaning up on the way out."

"There's got to be something down here. Why else would so many Gongs have died to defend it? They couldn't have gotten it all out before the SeeGeeks chased them off — we just have to find it before they

get here."

The beam from the light bounced off a wide fibrometal door in the left wall, faintly illuminating Pepper's oval face. "I think this is a lift entrance — should we try out the next level?"

The taller Hellcat pilot switched off the scanner for a while to conserve the old batteries. "Might as well... we haven't had any luck up here."

The loading doors slid aside after a few minutes of fiddling with their controls. "I guess the miners expected to come back," Pepper observed as they got in. "The air's still on, and we still have power to the lifts. You'd think they could have left the lights on for us too."

Flameout checked the lift buttons. "Okay, Toka. The bottom level on this thing is locked off with an entry code. So, guess where we want to go?"

"Don't call me Toka; I hate it when you call me Toka." A fine cutting beam snipped off the cover of the keypad, and the Cartel woman ran leads from a device in her hand to the newly exposed wiring. After a half minute's work, the lights came on in the lift and it jerked into motion with a clang and a groan of resisting metal. They both blinked to clear the sudden spots from their eyes.

Pepper looked at the ceiling. "Did you hear something?"

"Yeah: the elevator hasn't had its monthly servicing. I'll write a nasty memo."

"No! No, I think I heard something else, some noise from the tunnels or something, Maybe the Gongen have found us!"

"Not a chance. Our Belt Runner is still playing chameleon in that pile of trashed battle salvage up top. Even if their spies on Europa heard about this little trip, every flight document in the system says we're not planning to head out here until tomorrow. We're fine."

She didn't look convinced. "I thought I heard something."

Irritated, Flameout flicked the scanner back on, and pointed it up. The screen remained quiet. "Nothing. See? All quiet on the surface front. We're not down that deep; even this old thing would pick up a Gong ship engine from here."

The lift jolted to a stop, and Flameout marched out into a decently-lit tunnel junction. Before she'd covered a dozen paces, the scanner started fleeping wildly at her.

"Gongen!" Pepper shrieked, running to catch up.

"Shut up!" Flameout replied in exasperation. "No, it's something down here. Not moving... but this old thing doesn't know what it's seeing... having trouble identifying the signal... can't even pick a direction." She gave it a whack with the heel of her hand, then pointed down two corridors, one ahead and one to the right. "It's either this way or that... not moving, not living... some sort of magnetic flux." She looked up again. "You go ahead. I'll take the right-hand way."

"But —"

"Aren't you in a hurry? I think you said Gongen were coming?"

Pepper stuck out her lower lip, then stalked off, slinging the black thermal cloak over her shoulder with

a disgusted gesture. *I doubt you're a natural blonde*, Flameout thought, *but you sure fit all the old jokes*.

A few hundred meters later, she came up to another door of heavy fibro. A dusty keypad sealed the portal against unauthorized entry, but Flameout was sick to death of delays and subtlety. She pulled a detpack from her pouch and stuck it next to the lock. Shortly, a puff of black smoke mixed into the dust and mist in the corridor, and she pushed the heavy door back in its rails. Inside was the equipment of an advanced analysis lab, with a few Deigan crates scattered around. These weren't empty, and her eyes widened. *Now I really wish we'd found a forkbot...*

Twenty minutes later, Pepper came back to the lift. A scuffed yellow plastic DHM crate sat within, and Flameout was shoving a second one next to it. "Nice timing," the Hellcat complimented her. "I briefly considered leaving without you, but I don't want to drag both these crates all the way back to my ship by myself. What did you find?"

"I turned up a huge quantum computer installation in a secure chamber and fiddled with it for a bit. The memory's still active, but the processors are dead as irradiated Tokyo. It would take me a week to get anything interesting out of it. What do you have in those crates?"

"Toka, we are rich. Rich, rich, rich, rich. We are so rich I don't even mind sharing." She popped open the lid of one of the boxes, and handed Pepper a heavy translucent yellow globe. Various sockets and connectors poked from the top of the sphere, and a faint golden glow seeped from the device's complex crystalline interior.

Pepper looked unenlightened. "It's pretty. So what? Can we eat it?"

"If this is what I think it is, it's no wonder the Geeks and Gongs are on their way back here. I was in the Rats' Nest once, listening to some drunk science nerd from out on The Edge. He was talking about those giant NoBots that the Gongen computer network designed to drive off the Earthers. He disappeared the next day, and I haven't heard of him again.

"I think this is a NoBot power core."

Pepper looked shocked. "Why would they want to build NoBots out here? This isn't quite the heart of the fighting."

"That's for sure. Take a look at this lab report I found."

"Analysis of the containment vessel reveals atypical magnetic and gravitic residues," Pepper read. "Note similarities to readings taken from Isotope Tg-471 testing." She shook her head. "Might as well be in Chinese."

"Tg is an unstable element, they call it truginium. It shouldn't even exist naturally, but according to Scientist Boy, people have been finding a lot of it lately — right here on Ganymede." She pointed to the other crate, labeled *Do not disrupt stasis. Maximum storage 75 years*. "This box is full of the stuff. This place is a store of NoBot fuel."

Pepper's jaw dropped. "We've hit the jackpot. You could buy a year's worth of air and coolant on Mercury with this information!"

"Let's be a bit less hypothetical, Toka. You could pay off the Gambler, finish buying your new eyes, and have enough left to invest in a ship if you want. Me, I'll never be short of fuel cred again!" Flameout hit

the lift button. "We have scored!"

The doors slid open at the top of the shaft, and both women backed out, dragging the crates out with them. "I think there might have been an electric cart about a half-kilometer back, if you think you can get it working -"

Pepper straightened up. "Uh, Flameout, I don't think that's a priority." Naida turned to look at what Pepper had seen. Before them was a shape from a nightmare, covered in thick, pitted black flesh with moist red cracks running all over. Clawed hands flexed at the end of spiked, heavy arms; a horned, demonic face with glowing red eyes glanced over them as it skittered forward on four armored legs. In no time, Flameout's Colt-Burton sidearm was out, and she loosed a string of shots at the Quay intruder, but the effort was useless. The shots seemed to be absorbed straight into its shadowy body.

The Quay didn't even seem to notice. It charged forward, knocking them both aside. Flameout managed to keep her grip on her gun, but the short sword Pepper carried for emergencies clattered away. The terrible alien's attention moved to the crates, and it reached for the one full of truginium. The red cracks over its body seemed to shine brightly as it lifted the prize and turned away from them.

"Why is it ignoring us?" Pepper whispered, trying to crouch behind the Hellcat.

"I don't know," she answered, "I'm not sure I have a problem with that, either."

"But what does it want with our truginium?"

Flameout shook her head slowly. "Maybe the stuff's good for something else besides NoBot cores."

A streak of lightning shot from down the corridor, striking the fleeing Quay, and sparking and leaping from horn to horn of its spiked body. A second shot followed, and the Quay jerked erect as if on puppet strings, dropping the crate and clattering forward for a meter before collapsing in an untidy pile. Its eyes and crevices dimmed slightly.

«Escaped criminal Labanaka: you have been located and disabled by Claviger Ampatra. Further resistance is a waste of your resources,» echoed a voice in Flameout's head: one she'd heard rumors of but hoped never to hear. From the shadows sailed a Shi in that race's equivalent of combat armor. The creature had a long, diamond-shaped tail where a human's legs would be, and floated confidently a few inches from the ground. Its blue-gray skin seemed slick and damp, reflecting the cold fluorescent light. The Shi had two nearly-human arms, and at its side it held the curved, polearm-style staff from which the lightning had come. It turned to face them, showing a grotesque visage of gills and glassy eyes, which could have been a mask or a hideous face. *«When we return to my quarrel, we will discuss what you are doing on this satellite, in the company of two clearly irrelevant humans. My fellow clavigers are eager to see you again.»*

"Irrelevant!" Flameout shouted. She squeezed off four more shots at the intruding Shi. All four bounced from its body armor to detonate against the walls. The Shi ignored her completely and angled its staff toward the dazed Quay. Another display of light encircled the subdued alien, which began to rise gracefully from the ground.

"You said there was no one up here," Pepper accused her as she cowered behind the other woman.

"I said there were no Gongs up here," Flameout growled. "I don't think that heirloom of a scanner is designed to pick up floaters or demons."

"We need to leave now," Pepper said quietly. "See, it doesn't look like he cares either way..."

"I'm not leaving without the crates," Flameout hissed back. "That's my future sitting in them, and yours too!" She dropped her gun and tried to drag the truginium crate away from Labanaka, but the movement caught Ampatra's attention, and the staff lightning danced over the yellow plastic briefly. Flameout let go quickly, the skin of her hands full of pins and needles.

For the first time, the Shi seemed to show an emotion — surprise. *«Isotope 471? Intriguing. Humans have managed to isolate isotope 471. Labanaka, I will return for you shortly... this information is more important than a single unruly slave.»* Contempt layered Ampatra's broadcast thoughts. The Quay dropped clumsily to the ground, and the pair of crates lifted instead. The Shi turned away from the two women, and began to drift off with its prize.

"No!" Flameout tried to pick up her gun, but her fingers were still numb. Pepper held her back.

"Let it go! It saved our butts from Labanaka, and it doesn't care about us."

"We need those crates! And we can't let the Shi know what we've found out here, they'll be all over this rock — we'll be slaughtered! Even the damn Earthers and Gongen!"

"Let the Shi go, it doesn't matter!"

"Of course it does! The thing's nearly gone, we have to do something!"

Pepper sighed. "Of course we do." She pulled out the device she'd used on the lock, and flipped open a panel in the back. Under that panel was a red button she pressed. Two flashes of light barely preceded two loud explosions from where the Shi had been. When the smoke cleared, there were a pair of scorch marks on the floor, and a few shreds of yellow plastic.

Flameout blinked several times. She shook her head and stared at Pepper, who seemed to be standing a bit taller. "Wha..."

"I mined the boxes. I was really, really, really, really sick of you calling me Toka."

She gaped. "But... okay, I could understand it if you'd knifed me in the back for the money... but you just blew up a fortune!"

Pepper shook her head. "There are six more boxes of cores and frag downstairs next door to that dead computer. I knew you wouldn't take me seriously enough to think I'd lie to you. That's why I've been whining all trip."

"You... devious... treacherous... lying..."

"Yep, all of that and more. Now, I found a forkbot downstairs, and think I can get it working. Wanna help me get the rest of those boxes up here before Labby wakes up? I promise, I'm out of explosives."

To her own surprise, Flameout found herself grinning. "You know what? I think this is the beginning of a completely paranoid relationship."

"Yeah."

"Sounds like lots more fun than the whining. Let's go."